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# There is a Land in the Far Off West

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# COLUMBIA

## THE MAGAZINE OF NORTHWEST HISTORY

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### There is a Land in the Far Off West

By Michael Maben

#### Columbia Magazine, Winter 2006-07: Vol. 20, No. 4

During the winter and spring of 1852 the Oregon Territory was a subject of great interest to Indiana newspapers and the Indiana General Assembly. This interest led to passage of a resolution by that august body and the publication of a poem, "Oregon," in an Indianapolis newspaper. On the occasion of the poem's republishing 150 years later, Indiana's interest in Oregon Territory is deserving of reflection.

During the 1840s the status of Oregon was a significant national political issue. The Oregon Country was a major issue in the 1844 presidential campaign between James K. Polk and Henry Clay, and there was strong sentiment in the old northwestern states of Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana for the acquisition of Oregon. The Indiana General Assembly passed three resolutions in the 1840s on the Oregon question, urging that the United States take control of the territory. The first was approved on January 28, 1843, and was entitled "A Joint Resolution in relation to the territory of the United States, West of the Rocky Mountains, called the Oregon Territory." This resolution urged the federal government to take possession of the territory between the 42nd and 49th parallels and organize a civil government. The second resolution was approved on January 13, 1844, and was entitled "A Joint Resolution on the subject of the Oregon Territory." This resolution, which was extremely anti-British, stated that "the insatiate avarice, and grasping spirit of the British government seem already directed to its subjugation and conversion..." and claimed that the United States should occupy and defend Oregon, "peaceably [sic] if we can, forcibly if we must." Then, during the General Assembly's 29th Session, a third resolution, entitled "A Joint Resolution on the subject of the Oregon Territory," was approved on January 13, 1845. It declared that the United States had the right to all of Oregon south of the 52nd parallel, and it urged the United States "to annul and abrogate the treaty between the two Governments, relative to the joint occupation of such Territory by the two Governments."

At this point, the Indiana General Assembly ceased passing resolutions on Oregon for several years. The Oregon issue, however, continued to arouse people's passions from the halls of Congress and the White House to the towns and newspaper offices of Indiana. On Saturday, October 11, 1845, the Fort Wayne *Sentinel* stated, "THE HOOSIERS ARE READY" and "Oregon and Texas are ours; and we must have them." The *Sentinel* published an editorial on March 21, 1846, that concluded with the words, "It is time the Senate was done with this question; we have had words enough, and quarrelling enough; all we now want is ACTION." The Terre Haute *Wabash Express* ran a long article about Oregon on March 25, 1846, saying in part:

*England cannot come here and whip us into any submission-that is impossible as long as we have any Saxon blood in our veins, but it requires no prophet to say whose blood would flow the freest for many years in the beginning of a war.... We say then, if an honorable compromise can be had, let us have it; if not, put the country in the best possible state of defense, and let WAR and blood and anguish decide who owns the waste lands on the Pacific coast.*

It is interesting that the Express contains such bellicose language over what it describes as "waste lands." The Shelbyville Recorder during the spring of 1846 ran the caption, "No Red Lines across the map of Oregon," directly below the paper's name. Finally, on May 23, 1846, the Bloomington Herald stated in reference to Oregon, "No surrender of one single foot whilst one drop of American blood remains to defend it." However, with war looming and then breaking out against Mexico, President Polk was anxious to avoid going to war with Great Britain. In April 1846 he submitted a draft treaty to the Senate; the Senate then approved the terms



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extending the border down the 49th parallel, and the agreement was signed by the United States and Britain on June 15, 1846, and swiftly ratified by the Senate four days later.

The 36th Session of the Indiana General Assembly convened in Indianapolis. on December 1, 1851. It was the longest legislative session in Indiana history-204 calendar days-and one of the most significant. Due to dissatisfaction with the original Indiana constitution of 1816, the electorate of Indiana adopted a new constitution on August 4, 1851, which is still in effect today. The official history of the General Assembly points out that for the 36th Session, "[t]he task of implementing the Constitution caused the introduction of 560 bills plus innumerable resolutions, reports, and propositions.... Some 270 bills emerged from this mass to become law...." One of those resolutions was Senate Joint Resolution 69, introduced by Senator Robert Crawford of Decatur County (southeastern Indiana) and entitled, "A Joint Resolution on the subject of emigration to Oregon and the Pacific coast." Senator Crawford introduced his resolution on January 31, 1852. It was read for the first time that day, and there was no debate on the bill. It was read a second time on February 10 and a third time on February 13. After the third reading the bill was passed by the senate without debate or dissenting vote-39 ayes, 0 nays, out of 50 senators.

The resolution then moved to the house. It was first read the same day that it passed the senate-February 13, 1852. It was read a second time on February 14 and a third time on February 16. As in the senate, there was no debate and the measure passed unanimously-76 ayes, 0 nays, out of 100 representatives. On February 19, 1852, Governor Joseph Wright signed the resolution, which in its enacted form stated:

*A Joint Resolution on the subject of emigration to Oregon and the Pacific coast. (APPROVED FEBRUARY 19, 1852.) WHEREAS, It is unsafe for citizens of the States to emigrate to Oregon, or the Pacific coast, by the overland route, rendered so by the depredations of Indians or other persons; and believing, that it is but just, and right that those persons emigrating to the far west should receive protection from the general government, &c.; therefore, Resolved by the General Assembly of the State of Indiana, That our Senators in Congress be instructed, and our Representatives requested to use their influence to procure as speedily as may be practicable, protection from the general government, to those citizens who may emigrate to the Oregon territory or Pacific coast, &c. Resolved further, That his Excellency the Governor be requested to transmit immediately, a copy of this resolution to each of our Senators and Representatives in Congress.*

Once this was signed by Governor Wright, Senator Crawford promptly left Indiana and emigrated with his family and friends to Oregon.

After Senate Joint Resolution 69 was approved by the Indiana General Assembly, the subject of Oregon came up numerous times during the spring of 1852 in the Indianapolis newspapers. On March 11, 1852, the Whig Party-leaning (and later the Republican Party-leaning) Indiana State Journal mentioned that numerous parties of emigrants were in the process of leaving for Oregon, with the intention of rendezvousing in St. Joseph, Missouri. On March 15, 1852, the State Journal again commented on emigration to Oregon, stating that "Men in the prime of life as well as old and young, are all imbibing the spirit of chance and adventure, and are bound for the land where sudden fortunes and perfect health are looked for, but after all, rarely found or obtained."

The other major Indianapolis newspaper, the Democratic-leaning *Indiana State Sentinel*, also ran items concerning Oregon. On April 22, 1852, it printed an article entitled "Fertility of Oregon" in which it quoted an Oregon newspaper's claim that turnips in Polk County "frequently grow to the weight of 25 or 30 pounds." On May 20, 1852, the *Sentinel* printed a long letter from a farmer in Marion County, Oregon. The writer, Wesley Shannon, sent it to a friend of his in Indiana, a state senator from Dearborn County named James Milliken. The paper stated, "The writer, Mr. Wesley Shannon, was formerly a citizen of Henry county, in this State. We knew him well, and can vouch for the truth of his assertions." The missive extolled the virtues of Oregon, commenting on the fine climate, excellent soil, fruit trees, forests, and availability of waterpower. He concluded: "What I write to you is the result of long experience and close observation. I have carefully refrained from overestimating the advantages of Oregon, for I decidedly prefer emigrants should be favorably disappointed, if disappointed at all."

On April 16 and 17, 1852, the *Indiana State Journal* printed a poem entitled "Oregon." The poem appears in its entirety below with some spelling modernized and obvious errors corrected.

**Oregon**

*There is a land in the far off West,  
Beyond where the mountains are lost in the skies,  
Where the eagle screams with warlike crest,  
And in lofty career with the storm-god vies;  
O, there is the land where nature [h]as strown, (5)  
With lavishing hand, the choice of her store!  
And with her green carpet the earth's o'ergrown,  
From mountains sublime to the Pacific shore.  
'Tis the fairy land-of our sisterly band,*

*And Columbia's bold eagle broods o'er, (10)*  
*On our banner unfurled, the pride of the world,*  
*Where Britannia's beast, with fallen crest,*  
*Drags his tail on the ground, nor dares he to roar.*  
*The clear mountain stream springs from the rock,*  
*And leaping o'er cataracts, rolls to the sea; (15)*  
*The tim'rous deer, in wild sportive flock,*  
*Drinks at its margin, and then frolics away;*  
*The buffalo ruminates under the shade,*  
*And scours the plain with thundering roar,*  
*Or quietly feeds in some mossy glade, (20)*  
*Or along the briny deep ocean's shore.*  
*The mountain breeze, as it flits through the trees,*  
*Flushes with health the pioneer's cheek;*  
*For ague's chill breath, the footage of death,*  
*Gnaws his own heart, and dies of the smart; (25)*  
*And health reigns from valley to mountain peak.*  
*That is the land I'd choose for my home,*  
*The mountain's white summit in rapture I'd tread,*  
*And betwixt clouds and heaven I'd roam,*  
*And flight the wild deer from his high airy bed: (30)*  
*Then down on the plain I'd build me a cot,*  
*And plenty and peace would smile round my hearth.*  
*Contentment would bless in that happy lot,*  
*I'd fear not the flood-I'd fear not the dearth,*  
*In the broad lap of wealth, and blessed too with health, (35)*  
*I'd bow to my God, and be loved by the poor.*  
*Religion would cheer my heart all the year;*  
*And when called to die, away through the sky,*  
*Away to my home up in heaven I'd soar.*  
-Nella

While the poem is attributed to a "Nella," the paper does not identify who Nella was, nor is there any introduction to the poem. The author, for someone who probably had never been to Oregon, does not make that many mistakes; the most glaring one appearing in the second stanza where there are four lines about buffalo on the plains or along the ocean shore. Buffalo were indigenous to Indiana (the buffalo appears on the state seal), although by the mid 19th century there were none left there. The writer probably assumed that buffalo roamed all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

The animals mentioned in the poem include eagles (two times), once as a symbol for the United States (line 10); deer (two times); buffalo; and a "beast" (probably the royal lion) as a symbol for Great Britain (line 12). Mountains figure prominently, including the opening lines in all three stanzas, and are used as a symbol of health and reaching up to God. Health, prosperity, and contentment are mentioned throughout the poem, including the final five lines of the second stanza and several times in the third stanza.

The conflict with Great Britain also takes a prominent place in the poem-the final five lines of the first stanza. This is no surprise, since the struggle with Great Britain over Oregon had only been resolved six years earlier. Religion and personal salvation interestingly are used to close the poem. Finally, the word "Oregon" appears only in the title and never in the body of the poem.

The reaction to all this by someone living in Indiana in 1852 is hard to imagine. It was a presidential election year and the newspapers were filled with campaign rhetoric (since they literally functioned as the political parties' spokesmen) and discussion about sectional conflict over slavery. The only negative comment about Oregon that could be located in the Indianapolis newspapers that spring was from the *State Journal* on March 15, 1852, pointing out that "sudden fortunes and perfect health are... rarely found or obtained." Memories of the California gold rush of 1849 probably influenced this statement. However, due to the number of positive comments about the Oregon Territory in the newspapers, many people were obviously pulling up stakes in Indiana and emigrating to the Pacific Northwest, seeking that land of "sudden fortunes and perfect health."

An Oregon native, Michael Maben is employed as the cataloging librarian at the Indiana University School of Law Library at Bloomington. He found the poem "Oregon" in the *Indiana State Journal* while doing research on the Indiana General Assembly.

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